

## Interpretative Quests in Theory and Pedagogy

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### Abstract

In this paper, I extend theoretical understandings of the gaming activity and literary form called the “quest” and its relationship to issues of interpretation, focusing primarily on game theory with concrete examples as well as some broadly applicable pedagogical uses of these ideas in literature classrooms. The argument contributes to a recent theoretical and practical discussion of “quests” by scholars of games studies such as Aarseth 2004, Juul 2005, Tosca 2003, and Tronstad 2001. I build upon and revise these theorists’ understandings by approaching a “quest” as a goal-oriented activity in which players undertake a journey in search of meaning. By demonstrating similarities between the literary traditions in which quests are central and the practice of digital game design, I argue that quests can be better understood theoretically and more productively used in the classroom if meaning and action are regarded as complementary design principles instead of conflicting impulses. A revised understanding of quests can help to mediate between games and narratives by showing strategies by which game designers have created meaningful action, often in ways that are either unconsciously similar to or inspired by the literary traditions of mythology, epic, and romance. Specifically, game designers can use level design to create labyrinthine spaces that encode thematic implications, in the tradition of literary allegory. If these symbolic spaces are coordinated with significant obstacles and challenges, the apparent conflict between meaning and action can be resolved through engaging gameplay that allows players to enact a range of thematic ideas, contributing to the ongoing replay value of a digital game. I also suggest ways in which this understanding of quests can allow literature teachers to plan assignments where students transform literary narratives into interpretative quests taking the form of digital games. As a paradigmatic example, I describe one such assignment, in which my students adapted episodes from Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* into design documents and prototypes, and I suggest some theoretical implications of its results for other instructors. By adapting works of literature into quests, students learn to discover and create meaning through the active exertion of cognitive and imaginative effort rather than absorbing it passively.

## Quests: Theoretical Background

A quest is both a genre of gaming activity and a structure that operates throughout an extended tradition of ancient and modern literary works that have inspired games and may also be better understood when taught through the medium of games. While there are many more general applications of gaming in literary pedagogy, quests are worthy of extended, focused study because the need for general works on game design and game pedagogy has already been filled. These pioneering studies include the work of Henry Jenkins and the Education Arcade at MIT [Jenkins 2004], the encyclopedic compendium of Salen and Zimmerman’s *Rules of Play* [Salen 2004], and James Paul Gee’s foundational academic study of game pedagogy in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* [Gee 2004]. These works, as well as general works on game design like Rollings and Adams’ *On Game Design*, tend to explore a wide variety of game genres and their applications in many fields of “serious gaming”, from teaching chemistry concepts and rhetoric to modeling business ethics and economics. Yet within these works, there is usually the acknowledgment that some related genres of games share a similar form of gameplay that emphasizes the unraveling of a mysterious underlying story, the development of character through the gradual acquisition of more powerful objects and skills, as well as the pursuit of a goal by traveling through a fantastical landscape. Such games include both single-player role-playing games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), as well as adventure and action-

adventure games. These games are sometimes set apart from other game genres because they contain quests, to the point that some games researchers refer to them collectively as “quest games”. There have been a few foundational articles dealing specifically with the issue of quests, including Espen Aarseth’s “Quest Games as Post Narrative Discourse” [Aarseth 2004] and Susana Tosca’s “The Quest Problem in Computer Games” [Tosca 2003]. Yet there remains much more to be studied in relation to this particular type of game and gaming activity; indeed, it may be more productive in light of the plethora of high-quality general works on game design to focus on particular threads such as the quest that give coherence, focus, and originality to new inquiries.

The concept of the quest is useful in both the theory and practice of game design, because it offers one way out of the debate between narratologists and ludologists and into a more productive focus on issues surrounding the goal-oriented pursuit of meaning in both games and literature. As most scholars of new media now know, narratologists analyze games as stories, while ludologists insist that games should be studied for the features that are distinctively related to play, such as rules and simulation. While the definition of both narrative and game are highly contested by both camps, these theorists tend to define a narrative as a sequence of events that a reader follows in time, while a game is a set of rules for interactive play. The debate between narratologists and ludologists occupied much of the first wave of game studies, such as the essays in the anthology *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, but many games researchers are now claiming to have moved beyond this conflict. However, what it means to move forward differs greatly from party to party. In some cases, this statement amounts to an explicit or implied argument that one side won, usually the ludologists, who are seen to have attained a victory based upon the increasing acceptance of studying games on their own terms rather than through cinematic or literary theories. Other key figures in the former ludology/narratology debate, such as Gonzalo Frasca, have recently dismissed the debate as unproductive, claiming that it was always founded upon the misconception that game theorists were inherently hostile toward stories.

In effect, current debates about the ludology/narratology question often result in even fiercer arguments over whether the debate is in fact over, followed by meta-debates over who won and how to proceed. Some scholars, such as Elizabeth Losh in “Making Things Public: Democracy and Government-Funded Virtual Reality Simulations,” argue that a second debate has replaced the ludology/narratology debate in the form of a clash between critics who analyze the merits of persuasive games for achieving political change versus critics who critique the role of games in maintaining the current status quo [Losh 2006]. Such an approach shifts emphasis away from games and stories, opting for a more politicized methodology akin to the work of New Historicists and cultural studies scholars in literature departments. However, another move has involved gestures of rapprochement between game and narrative on the part of games researchers such as Espen Aarseth and his colleagues Jesper Juul and Susana Tosca at the Center for Computer Games Research in Copenhagen. These reconciliatory gestures often involve the identification of a mediating term, such as “quests”, that suggests qualities of both games and narrative while exhibiting features that require a distinct theoretical name.

As Jesper Juul explains in *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, many scholars of video games have written about the concept of the quest as one attempt to resolve the ludology versus narratology debate [Juul 2005]:

As an attempt at bridge-building between the open structure of games and the closed structure of stories, the concept of quests has been proposed by Ragnhild Tronstad (2001), Espen Aarseth (2004b), and Susan Tosca (2003). Quests in games can actually provide an interesting type of bridge between game rules and game fiction in that the games can contain predefined sequences of events that the player then has to actualize or effect. [Juul 2005, 17]

Juul concisely defines the difference between a quest and a narrative by focusing on the issue of performative activity, which requires the player of a game to cause events to occur through effort rather than passively observing as these events unfold. Instead of dispensing with the events of narrative altogether, as some radical ludologists propose, theorists of the quest suggest that a game can contain a strong story without losing its playability if the player must enact its events. This concept includes the idea of “interactivity”, by which a player can change a narrative through her actions, but the quest is not only an interactive narrative. Rather than playing in a simulated world where unplanned

narratives spontaneously emerge out of the rules of the game, a player of a quest undertakes a goal-oriented activity that requires her to overcome challenges in order to cause a range of possible but specific events to occur.

In other words, the concept of a quest synthesizes games and narratives by emphasizing that the events of a narrative will not occur unless a player actively overcomes obstacles through the exertion of effort within a rule-based system in order to accomplish a task. Aarseth offers the most succinct definition of a quest when he writes that “a player-avatar must move through a landscape in order to fulfill a goal while mastering a series of challenges. This phenomenon is called a quest” (368). Aarseth’s definition highlights two important features of the quest: it involves movement through space that is directed toward the accomplishment of a task, and it requires the overcoming of difficulties in order to reach this goal. However, Aarseth’s definition tends to strip the idea of the quest of its content, such as the meaning of the goal or the nature of the space traversed. Many games have objectives, spaces, and challenges, but not all designers and players tend to use the word “quest” to describe all of these games. Indeed, the word “quest” figures most prominently in role-playing games and adventure games, from early adventure games like *King’s Quest* to more recent role-playing games like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* or MMORPGs like *Everquest II* and *World of Warcraft*. These games in fact allude to a long tradition of literature about quests that has been theorized by comparative mythologists such as Joseph Campbell and formalist literary critics such as Northrop Frye. These figures belong firmly to the narratological tradition that ludologists have tended to oppose but that can complement their work rather than clashing with it. Viewed in this light, Joseph Campbell’s three-part description of the Hero’s Journey is closer to Aarseth’s definition than it might at first seem:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. [Campbell 1949, 30]

As in Aarseth, Campbell emphasizes a protagonist’s spatial movement and accomplishment of difficult tasks in order to attain goals in the form of the ability to share his rewards. Unlike Aarseth, Campbell maps the content of the spaces that the hero moves through, characterized by a pattern of “separation” from the world of everyday nature and society, “initiation” into a separate, fantastic world, and “return” with the fruits of his labor. Technically, Campbell’s definition refers to a “journey” rather than a “quest” — a distinction that has to do with his interest in comparative mythology of many cultures rather than the exclusively Western literary tradition of romance. However, the literary critic Northrop Frye argues that “romance” is the genre or “mythos” that both contains the quest and is contained by it in its overall structure. Frye writes that “the essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form, hence we know it better from fiction than from drama ” [Frye 1957, 186]. Adventure is not synonymous with romance but is rather its content, and this content takes the form of a sequence. For Frye, the quest is the climactic episode in a series of adventures, distinguished from minor events by its size and centrality. At the same time, the quest is also the formal principle by which the romance is structured, without which it would only be a sequence of adventures. Frye concisely summarizes, “We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest” [Frye 1957, 187]. Frye explains,

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. [Campbell 1949, 30]

Frye’s structure, like Campbell’s, has three parts, but Frye collapses the second of Campbell’s stages (“initiation”) into the first stage of his schema. Frye also ends the quest at the conclusion of Campbell’s second stage, directly after what Campbell would call the hero’s greatest battle or “ordeal” and his subsequent “apotheosis” or elevation to divinity.

Because of the relationship of Aarseth’s and Tosca’s definitions of the quest to an extended ancient and modern literary tradition, this gaming activity has wide research and pedagogical implications. Susana Tosca observes the relevance of the genres of epic and romance as well as Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey to the “background” of quest games though she brackets the question of how closely the literary and gaming traditions can be related, arguing primarily that

such theories are “not pointless” to the study of games [Tosca 2003, 4.1]. Tosca’s claim is insightful but deserves further development, since a more detailed and forceful statement of the relationship between the literary tradition of quests and their operation as a gaming activity would allow the quest concept to fulfill its bridge-building function more effectively. Stronger connections between the literary history of quest narratives and quest games can also offer strategies for how to teach a rich tradition of literature through technologies associated with a more recent but equally valuable selection of games, from early adventure games of the 1980’s to next-generation RPG’s. I have given an assignment in which I taught Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* by having students design quests, and there is vast lineage of narratives about quests that includes a variety of genres and periods. This includes ancient epics like *The Odyssey*, medieval romances like *Parzival* or *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, Renaissance allegory, nineteenth century novels patterned on the romance such as *Jane Eyre*, modern detective stories, and some postmodern narratives. This lineage of literature is indeed only a selection of possible works, but it is a rich, broad selection that is relevant to almost anyone in the humanities with an interest in canonical literature. It is certainly the case that some works of literature would be better taught through the analytical lens of the quest than others. For example, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* would be productively understood as a protagonist’s voyage toward a meaningful goal across the obstacle-ridden, symbolic landscape of Thruscross Grange, while the complex negotiations of power relations and parlor-room social maneuvering of *Pride and Prejudice* might be better taught through a simulation game like *The Sims*. Nevertheless, there is an important feature of literary study in general that can be better understood through the paradigm of the quest than in any other game type: the pursuit of meaning as an active cognitive and imaginative enterprise rather than passive consumption, aimless social interaction, or uncommitted exploration of indeterminacy.

The critical studies of the “quest” are increasingly becoming more than just a middle ground between game and narrative, focusing on the relationship between meaning and action, and revolving around the issue of significant gameplay. Theoretical and pedagogical understandings of the quest will increase if we focus further on the issue of meaning in quests, extending the idea of meaning beyond semiotic indications of function to thematic implications. For Tronstad, “to do a quest is to search for the meaning of it” [Tronstad 2001, 4.1]. However, Tronstad’s use of “meaning” is primarily functional rather than thematic in that it is concerned with signs as indicators of a game object’s function rather than the ideas associated with it. Hence, she argues that when a player finds a new object, she must “decode its significance in relation to the quest, to come closer to the quest’s solution” [Tronstad 2001, 4.1]. In other words, if a player discovers a key, the “meaning” of this key is that there will be something for it to open, such as a chest. If the player then discovers a sword in the chest upon opening it, this sword might have the “meaning” that a dragon must be fought and slain. This concept of meaning ignores the possibility of deeper thematic significance, in which the player must enact not only events, but also ideas and insights. Tronstad does argue that the motivation for the quest is the “promise” of meaning, but she also argues that quests must withhold this meaning if they are to keep their status as quests. She explains that quests are “promising their solution, promising *meaning*. But as meaning is also the death of the quest, it is frequently breaking this promise, in order to prolong the questing experience” [Tronstad 2001, 3]. By setting up a false binary between meaning and action, Tronstad overlooks the idea that players can enact meaning if the elements of the quest have thematic implications that are revealed through play.

Because Tronstad’s focus on meaning is strictly functional, she views the movement from quest to narrative as unidirectional and unrepeatable. Thus, she argues that

the paradox of questing is that as soon as meaning is reached, the quest stops functioning as *quest*. When meaning is found, the quest is *history*. It cannot be done again, as it is simply not the same experience to solve a puzzle quest for the second time. [Tronstad 2001, 4.1]

This analysis is only true if meaning is conceived of in the utilitarian manner that Tronstad suggests. It is true that once a player has determined what chest a key unlocks, the meaning of the key ceases to be interesting in subsequent playing sessions. However, if the key has greater, multivalent allegorical and symbolic connotations, then these might be productively and enjoyably enacted multiple times by different players, as they deepen their understanding of this meaning or seek a different interpretation. The performance of the quest multiple times would result in the production of different or more richly developed constatives. Conversely, the constatives of literary narratives can be transformed into quests, which has the advantage both of making literature interactive and of bringing deeper symbolic meaning to the

actions of the quest. Tosca raises the possibility of literary narratives inspiring quests but temporarily brackets the issue, noting that “this is more a question of adaptation from one medium to another, and as such is beyond the limits of this paper” [Tosca 2003, 4.1]. At the same time, she does raise a series of interesting questions about to what extent such an adaptation would re-create the book’s “story-world,” its events, or be a “thematic adaptation” of the work. The “thematic adaptation” possibility highlights the importance of meaning in quests, the feature that Tosca explores least in her criticisms of existing quests and her suggestions for new ones. Tosca’s students criticized many existing quests in games for being “too linear, boring, repetitive, and unrelated to the character’s ‘physical’ and emotional development.” [Tosca 2003, 1] In response to these critiques, they created quests that were non-linear, emotionally involving, and had surprising plot twists. While these are positive pedagogical accomplishments, a key aspect of interesting quests is not just emotion or surprise but rather meaning, something that Tosca acknowledges but does not expand upon in her statement that “the quest or mission format allows for a contextualization of the game’s actions in a more or less meaningful story” (Tosca 2003, abstract). This raises the question of how to make quests more meaningful rather than less, and also of how to analyze the ways in which both designers and players create and enact meaning. Because critics often already treat spaces and objects in works of literature as having dense potential meaning, quests based on these narratives can inherit these meanings or complicate and challenge them. Designing a quest based on a work of literature is itself an act of interpretation by which the designer considers how a player will enact a meaning or range of possible meanings available in a text.

Because meaning is a highly difficult and complex concept, it deserves further theorization in order to function effectively both in the theory and practice of games generally and of quest games more specifically. Tronstad’s emphasis on the promise of meaning as the motivation of a quest is the beginning of such a movement, but she and Aarseth tend to see meaning and action as conflicting principles. Aarseth puts this conflict in the most extreme terms in his declaration that the quest games with most replay value are those that have no meaning at all. In order to better understand the operation of quests and their pedagogical function within literature classrooms — whose goal is often the interpretation of meaning — it would be productive to regard meaning and action not as opposed elements of quests but as complementary components that can be synthesized in meaningful action. Moreover, such a claim is borne out by close study of the games whose designers and players focus most overtly on quests as a gaming activity, such as contemporary role-playing games. Game designers, teachers, and students can better understand how to create a context in which meaning can emerge in quests by studying two aspects of this gaming activity and literary structure: its spaces and challenges, with particular emphasis on the objects sought out by players and questing heroes.

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## The Spaces of the Quest

Quests gain much of their interest and meaning from the player’s movement through simulated space, which acquires meaning as the environment upon which and within which the player must act. Jenkins offers a useful context for the role of space in quests in his article “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” where he argues that game designers do not create linear narratives but rather spaces that contain either “embedded” narratives suggested by the arrangement of space or “enacted” narratives that the player may perform in various orders [Jenkins 2004, 124–8]. A quest is more structured than what Henry Jenkins calls “emergent narrative” and more focused on the overcoming of challenge than Jenkins’ “enacted narrative.” An emergent narrative is a sequence of events that develops spontaneously out of a player’s rule-based interactions with a simulated world, such as *The Sims*. Once the player has performed a series of events within a playing session or series of sessions in such a game, she could recount them in the past tense and describe their relationship to each other or emotional significance to her. An “enacted narrative” is a game structure that allows a player to perform an event in a story that she is already familiar with as a spectator, such as Jenkins’s example of picking up a lightsaber and defeating Darth Maul in a game adaptation of *Star Wars: Episode I*.

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A quest is more structured than an emergent narrative because it has a predefined structure of events that will occur if the player succeeds, but it requires more effort from a player than an enacted narrative because these events will not occur unless the player overcomes certain challenges. Moreover, in a quest a player is not only bringing a story to fulfillment but is also enacting a set of thematic ideas and implications associated with the events of this story and experienced on the level of gameplay. The word “quest” implies the search for a valuable goal, a goal with significance to the player or to her virtual identity as avatar within a simulated world. One would not probably not speak of a “quest”

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to take out the trash in *The Sims* or to gobble all of the white dots in *Pac-Man*, except ironically. However, both designers and players have long referred to goals with special significance in the gameworld as “quests”, such as Sir Graham’s search in *King’s Quest I* for the three magical treasures that will save the Kingdom of Daventry, or the player’s attempt to close the gateway to the hellish plane of Oblivion in *The Elder Scrolls IV*. Even the “side quests” of role-playing games, which are distinguished from a “main quest” by their lack of an epic underlying storyline, have significance to the player in terms of either the acquisition of greater skills for her virtual identity or the benefit of her guild. Because quests are associated with significant objectives, it is also possible for them to convey thematic meaning in the form of allegory and symbolism that operates not only through the representational strategies of the game but also through the actions that each player performs within space.

Indeed, the spaces through which players move as they overcome challenges and fulfill the goals of quests can themselves encode meaning through the time-tested strategies of spatial allegory that have operated in quest narratives (and literary allegories more generally) since *The Quest of the Holy Grail* and *The Faerie Queene*. In *Mapping the Faerie Queene: Quest Structures and the World of the Poem*, Erickson argues that the vertical and horizontal spatial configuration of Spenser’s fictional cosmos conveys much of the thematic implications of the virtues embodied by the knights and their nation-building or ethical quests [Erickson 1996]. This scheme of meaningful landscapes “remediates” allegory, to use Bolter and Grusin’s terms for the reworking of one medium in terms of another. Bolter and Grusin observe that in digital art “naïve allegory is common, as we see, for example, in the computer game *Myst* with its allegory of the end of the book” [Bolter and Grusin 1999, 136]. By “naïve allegory,” they refer to art with an “obvious message,” presumably to be contrasted with heavily ironized, ambivalent allegory, such as that theorized by Paul de Man. They regard the “losing” endings of the computer game *Myst*, in which the player is entrapped within imprisoning books instead of being able to move freely through the space of computer graphics, as an allegorical critique of the book at the same time that the game remediates the book through its interface and plot.

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However, the tradition of creating meaningful spaces originates in literary allegories that are far from naïve, and which encourage a degree of engagement that prefigures digital games. As Erickson argues, the starting and ending points of the knights’ quests in Spenser’s poems themselves convey meaning. These quests begin in historical sixth-century Britain and then proceed into Faeryland, thereby conjoining the historical and political concerns of epic poetry with the private, fantastic themes of chivalric romance. Moreover, Erickson points out that Gordon Teskey’s recent theories of Spenserian allegory emphasize a “game of ‘interpretative play,’” in which readers learn not just by example but “by becoming engaged, through the play of interpretation, in the theory of virtue.” While Erickson and Teskey are not discussing New Media, the combination of Erickson’s focus on the imaginative spaces of the poem and Teskey’s interest in its elicitation of readers’ active involvement suggests that Spenser was already striving for the synthesis of “immersion and interactivity” that Marie-Laure Ryan upholds as the ideal of digital art [Ryan 2001]. Aarseth’s evocative phrase for video game representations of space, “allegories of space,” turns out to have another dimension besides the one that he focuses on [Aarseth 2000]. Aarseth argues that the spaces of digital games can only be “allegories” of space because they consist of digital implementations of automated rules necessary to create a game rather than actual physical or social laws. As he puts it,

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[i]n other words, the topology of even the most ‘open’ computer generated landscapes makes them quite different from real space, and controlled in ways that are not inherent in the original physical objects they are meant to represent. This makes them allegorical: they are figurative comments on the ultimate impossibility of representing real space. [Aarseth 2000, 169]

While the unbridgeable gap between representation and an unattainable objective reality has been well explored in De Man’s theories of allegory, the spaces of quests are also “figurative comments” on a wide variety of actions and ideas other than the self-reflexive problems of representing space, such as the goals of the player and their relationship to a larger simulated world. For example, in the classic role-playing game, *Ultima IV: The Quest of the Avatar*, designer Richard Garriott deliberately sets up an intricate system of correspondences between a set of moral virtues and the representational features of the game’s simulated world, including its colors, villages, and directions of the compass. As players battle monsters, seek out hidden shrines, and search for magical artifacts in each of the game’s sub-quests, they are acting out the game’s allegorical meanings (or failing to act them out), in such a way that gameplay gradually

reveals these correspondences, and successful completion of the quests necessitates an understanding of them.

Following both Spenser's literary allegories and Garriott's allegorical games, the environment of the maze is a key spatial principle whose organization can instantiate multiple interpretative paths as well as the search for a significant object through the active descent into a treacherous environment. Quests in games and literature often take place in mazes, which proliferate in the "descents into the underworld" of myth and the "dungeon crawls" of role-playing games. However, as Natkin argues in his analysis of level design, the coordination of the maze model with other gameplay elements is crucial to create immersive gameplay [Natkin 2006]. Distributed through this maze must be spatial obstacles to be overcome, such as locked doors and chasms, as well as objects and scripted events that specify the rules for overcoming these challenges and rewards for doing so. Indeed, Natkin draws much of his analysis of level design from Guardiola, who suggests that "a level is made up of a collection of quests," reinforcing the idea that contemporary game design is increasingly leaning toward a quest-based understanding of game space [Natkin 2006]. Without obstacles and rewards combined through logical event scripting, a level runs the risk of becoming aimless wandering, which in interpretative terms equates to a navigation of many possible meanings without ever arguing for their relative merits or analyzing them in depth.

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## The Challenges of the Quest

In order to progress through the spaces of quests, the player must overcome trials, and quests can thus be classified in part by the challenges that they provide and the initiations that result from overcoming these obstacles. A typology of quests would also include features such as the player's objective, the actions that he must undertake, and the quest's location. To construct a "typology" and "grammar" of these quests like that proposed by Aarseth, one would also need to examine the ways in which plot-lines inspired by literary genres give rise to quests or develop out of them. Although quests are not synonymous with narratives, story-lines offer an important motivation for undertaking quests as well as a reward for completing them. Taking into account features of both action and narrative, online communities of players have developed semi-formal classifications for quests, which have been further formalized in official "strategy guides". These schemes can be strengthened through close analysis of quests in games with a great variety of quests, like *World of Warcraft* and *Oblivion*.

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In-game text and gaming communities tend to classify quests as "fetch quests", "delivery quests", "dungeon crawls", "escort quests", and "kill quests", a typology that is reinforced by R.V. Kelly's similar list of quest types in *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games* [Kelly 2004]. These categories can be further divided into sub-categories, combined with each other, and melded with narrative back stories to produce a wide variety of possible quests. In a "fetch quest", a character must find a valuable, often magical object and return it to a non-player character (NPC) for a reward. While the term "fetch quest" is often used critically by gamers because this device has become ubiquitous and sometimes seems clichéd, the original "quest for the holy grail" is itself a "fetch quest". Indeed, the etymological origins of quest in "questare" (Latin: to seek) implies that the search for something absent or hidden is fundamental to questing. Vladimir Propp argued that this motif was the distinguishing feature of quests, which allowed them to take a central role in the morphology of folktales [Propp 1968]. Despite the familiarity of the form, the interest of such a quest depends upon the value and meaning of the object sought as well as the challenges that must be surmounted to reach it. Items necessary for the completion of a quest are often set aside in a player's inventory as "quest items", which cannot be destroyed or discarded because doing so would bring the plot to a stand-still. Such artifacts are distinguished from the proliferation of objects in the game that have strictly utilitarian or ornamental functions, such as ordinary weapons, tapestries, and furniture. Unlike these items, quest items are either unique (like the Holy Grail) or a component of a larger item, like the seven pieces of a magical staff or the three portions of the Triforce in the *Legend of Zelda* games. These objects are invested with significance as objects playing a key role in unfolding storylines, like the "McGuffins" of film but with an interactivity that comes from the player's ability to use them to cause a narrative to progress. They often also accrue personal, political, and even cosmic meaning as instantiations of the battling demonic and divine forces seeking to control the simulated world of the game. For example, in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, the four middle quests in the main quest-line involve finding Azura's star, the armor of Tiber Septim, a great Welkynd stone, and a great Sigil stone for the emperor's heir. Fetch quests in *Oblivion* range from mundane but sometimes charming "collection quests", such as looking for twelve scales from a rare breed of Slaughterfish, to cosmic, such as the search for a Great

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Sigil Stone. The slain emperor's heir uses this stone to close one gate to hell and open a doorway to the "paradise" where the final battle between good and evil takes place. A frequent variant on the "fetch quest" could be referred to as the "delivery quest" (less formally known as the "fedex quest"), in which a player must carry an item from one character to another. "Kill quests" or "assassination quests" require the player to slay monsters or hostile NPC's, either as an end in itself that remedies an injustice or as a means to an end, since the gaining of an item in a fetch quest often requires the defeat of many enemies.

Kill quests involve extensive combat with monsters, resulting in the intense violence that many opponents of video games decry. But they also allow a context in which players can confront, reflect upon, and in some cases refrain from battles with the forces regarded as "Evil" or "Other" by a given society. This violence is no more intense, detailed, or gratuitous than that practiced by Odysseus as he engages in his "kill quest" to slay the Cyclops or the suitors. Looking back over a long history of quest narratives, scenes in works of literature now considered "classic" revolve around brutal violence that equals or outstrips the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Combat pervades chivalric romance, since large parts of the action in these narratives involve ritualized jousting and swordplay between knights, not to mention the slaying of roving beasts and dragons. Indeed, Frye saw "dragon-killing" as the central, defining motif of quests in romances (189). Digital games simply put the responsibility for this violence on the player, who must acquire the dexterity and persistence necessary to destroy her enemies and may (in the case of games like *Fable* or *Oblivion*) determine the role of violence in the development of her player-character and the game's simulated world. As with all quests, the purpose and meaning of the violence determines the consequences of the player's actions. It is equally possible in *Oblivion* to murder random citizens or to destroy a demonic lord, but one action will put the player's avatar in jail while the other will result in a quest reward. Video games are often criticized for their violence, yet combat constitutes one of the key trials by which the meaningful conflicts of quest narratives are manifested, as well as one of the most fruitful opportunities for the conversion of narrative into action.

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Similar opportunities for meaningful action can emerge from an "escort quest", in which the player must guide an NPC from one location to another while protecting this character from enemies. In *Oblivion*, one early such quest involves bringing the slain emperor's heir, Martin Septim, from the besieged town of Kvatch to a refuge in Weynon Prior. Participation in such a quest results in an emotional investment toward the charge that the player protects, resulting at first involuntarily from the need to shield the non-player character in order to progress in the game. Yet, such a quest can have larger implications concerning the degree of one's complicity with a prevailing political regime in a game (for example, the opportunity to respect or abandon the Emperor in the opening quest of *Oblivion*), or the strength of a personal connection, such as the potentially poignant or tragic escort quest of Hero's mother in *Fable*.

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Thematic implications can occur with even greater subtlety in quests involving puzzles, which refer to any cognitive problem that must be solved in order to progress further in the game. Puzzles often take the form of navigating mazes, unlocking secret doors, answering riddles, deciphering codes, and finding and using unfamiliar objects or "treasures". Puzzles most commonly appear in certain genres, such as adventure games or designated "puzzle games", but Juul argues that the challenges exemplified in puzzles are characteristic of games in general [Juul 2005]. A well-designed puzzle has both thematic and cognitive aspects, since it requires designers and players to enact themes from the work at the same time that they solve an informational or mechanical problem. In *Twisty Little Passages*, Montfort offers an excellent example of how players may enact themes in games. In his analysis of Andrew Plotkin's experimental interactive fiction *So Far*, Montfort argues, "the workings of the IF world and the themes of *So Far* must be enacted [. . .] for the interactor to make progress" [Montfort 2003, 210]. Montfort is discussing a text-based game in which the solutions of puzzles require the player to both uncover and act out a theme of relationships that are "so close to but so far from" perfection by moving various items (like the two posts of a gate or two radioactive bricks) into proximity without allowing them to touch. Montfort's example is representative of a larger tradition of games that conjoin meaning and action in gameplay rather than putting them in conflict, including both early role-playing games like *Ultima IV*, more recent ones like *The Elder Scrolls*, and experimental action-adventure games like *The Indigo Prophecy*. Rather than having to "break" the promise of meaning in order to maintain the interest of the quest, these games have replay value precisely because fulfillment of their challenges allows players to contemplate nuances of thematic implication through their active effort rather than through passive spectatorship. In such a game, the distance between Aarseth's

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“interpretative” and “configurative” functions diminishes, as does the difference between Zimmerman’s “cognitive interactivity” involved in processing narratives (which he associates with readers’ “interpretative participation with a text”) and the “explicit interactivity” of designed choices (which he associates with games) [Zimmerman 2004, 158]; [Aarseth 1997, 64–65].

## The Pedagogical Implications of Interpretative Quests

By deliberately merging the interpretative and gameplay function performed by players, game design can be taught as a form of interpretative writing within literature classrooms. Such an assignment could involve transforming virtually any literary narrative into a quest, and any work that falls within the paradigmatic selection running from ancient epic to postmodern quest narrative would be particularly amenable to this form of adaptation. I have given one such assignment to my sophomore English literature class in which I asked students to adapt Thomas Pynchon’s postmodern novel *The Crying of Lot 49* into a quest.

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The assignment to design an interpretative quest has two components: a six page written paper combining features of a game design document and a traditional interpretative essay, as well as a small multimedia prototype of one part of the game. The practice of constructing design documents is familiar to practitioners of contemporary game design, as explained in books such as *Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design* [Rollings 2003]. A design document is a verbal and graphical presentation of the core elements of a game, such as its gameplay, levels, and narrative. In the game industry, such a document is usually prepared as a presentation to be given to potential investors, since commercial games often require millions of dollars, vast teams of designers with diverse skills, and years of planning, execution, and marketing. Hence, game designers need presentations to show others that their designs are sound as well as to keep the team focused on an overall plan.

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The design document in an English class differs from one made for the game industry in that it focuses more explicitly on meaning. However, the influential game design theorists Salen and Zimmerman do see meaning as a high priority in game design, and in documentation more generally, as when they write that “meaning, play and games are intimately related concepts. The goal of successful game design is **meaningful play**” [Salen 2004, 37]. Indeed, they define design in terms of “the creation of meaningful experience,” explaining that “**design** is the process by which a **designer** creates a **context** to be encountered by a **participant**, from which meaning emerges” [Salen 2004, 37]. Students create a context in which meaning can emerge by designing the aspects of a game that correspond to the most theoretically distinctive features of quests, including the spaces, challenges, and objects. The design document should contain descriptions and analyses of these elements, including textual and contextual evidence explaining what they mean as well as reflection on how the students’ own interpretative perspective helps to create this meaning.

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Because of the role of space in shaping quests, adaptations of literary texts work best when the designer does not reproduce the events of the narrative in a strictly linear fashion, but instead re-creates spaces in which players can bring about some of these events and their meanings. Building on a fictional world already created by an author, the student translates these geographic features into a world of ideas that can be explored by players. This requires interpretative decisions, since a location like the surrealist painting of Remedios Varo’s tower described in *The Crying of Lot 49* could be read as an emblem of Oedipa’s inescapable solipsism, as a foreshadowing of her escape through the use of imagination, or as a range of intermediate possibilities. Many of the most successful essays based their game concepts around spaces represented in Varo’s art, since Pynchon prominently alludes to her painting “Embroidering Earth’s Mantle” as a recurrent, ekphrastic metaphor in the novel. This topic helped to generate game ideas because Varo’s painting represents a dreamlike space conducive to a quest plot: a tower in which a group of captive girls weaves a tapestry that, paradoxically, contains the world. Moreover, the sequence of three paintings in the “triptych” that Pynchon alludes to suggests the structure of a journey in three stages (approaching the dreamlike world, imprisonment, and escape), which provides the potential outline for a quest.

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Students produced three different analytical approaches to the thematic significance of these paintings and three different ways of enacting these interpretations in gameplay, all of them taking place within the metaphorical “space” of Varo’s paintings. One student argued that the paintings suggest the mind’s ability to escape the confines of socially

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constructed reality through the higher reality of the imagination — the etymological meaning of the “sur-real” as practiced by Varo. A second student used the space of the Varo painting as the setting for a different game that takes the opposite interpretative stance, in which the weaving of the tapestry reflects Oedipa’s solipsistic entrapment within a reality entirely created by her own mind. A third student synthesized these two interpretations, suggesting that her game design will reward players who remain open to both surrealistic and solipsistic views of the space of the Varo painting. In a highly nuanced thesis statement, this student writes,

if Oedipa could easily choose a side, she would then cease to touch the “real world” that she so longs to find — creating the paradox that as long as Oedipa looks for “reality”, or *life*, she lives in it; but as soon as she assumes she has found it, it ceases to exist for her. [Neugebauer 2006]

Neugebauer’s thesis suggests one way in which visualizing *The Crying of Lot 49* spatially allowed a student to develop stylistically nuanced and argumentatively self-conscious writing that was flexibly open to the idea of interpretative indeterminacy. Other teachers could benefit from this result by allowing students to design spaces that map the world of ideas onto simulated geographical space, including imagined and artistic spaces within the work of literature, such as Jane Eyre’s ambiguously emblematic paintings or Achilles’ encyclopedically engraved shield in *The Iliad*. Encouraging students to design these conceptual spaces as well as “actual” or “realistic” locations within literary narratives could also help accommodate literature from a variety of periods to the constraints of role-playing toolsets, which often feature fantastic medieval landscapes that lend themselves to allegory.

Despite the richly multivalent signifying potential of spatial allegories, students who are adapting literary works into interpretative quests need to be reminded that an awareness of labyrinthine indeterminacy should not become an excuse for an utter lack of interpretative commitment. In other words, students should design their spaces to balance openness and rule-based constraint, one of the recurrent features of level design advocated by Natkin. One example of the rationale for this pedagogical principle appears in students’ readings of the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Oedipa confronts four “symmetrical” choices about the secret society she has been pursuing: it is real, it is a hallucination, it is a hoax, or it is the hallucination of a hoax [Pynchon 1964, 171]. These choices resemble the paths through a labyrinth, each of which gives rise to further choices and multiple, disorienting endings. Thinking of *The Crying of Lot 49* as the basis for an adventure or role-playing game, in which players often explore labyrinths, led several students to embrace this indeterminacy as an opportunity for the exploration of multiple meanings rather than frustration. However, students sometimes tended to come to rest complacently in this image, or to assert it dogmatically, often as a criticism of scholars who had developed well-supported arguments about a particular interpretation. While these students were well-intentioned, they sometimes seemed to use the image of the labyrinth as an excuse to avoid crafting their own thesis, as when one student wrote that “Through creating this game, I realize that the entire book, *The Crying of Lot 49*, was just a labyrinth itself” [Alonzo 2006]. Alonzo’s phrase “just a labyrinth” suggests that she is satisfied with multiple interpretative paths rather than a single interpretation. Yet, her suggestion that “the entire” book can be understood in this way is itself a totalizing argument that contradicts her other idea: that multiple readers can take different paths through the text. Such a view sometimes resulted in a lack of interpretative focus, as students celebrated different readers’ abilities to choose a path through the space of the quest without themselves committing to such a path. This tendency in some student essays serves as a reminder that simulated space is only one part of a well-designed quest, which must also pose goal-oriented and rule-based challenges to the player in order to produce an immersive game and allow the enactment of meaning.

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## Prototypes

Based on their design documents, the students built prototypes that combined aspects of their individual designs to form playable games through which players would enact the students’ interpretations of a portion of the novel. Students worked in four in-class game workshops and were instructed to meet two to three times out of class. The initial workshops were devoted primarily to planning and note-taking regarding the game concepts, while later workshops involved working with computers in the classroom to make the games. There were four group projects in my class that used three different major software applications and a mixture of other programs. Students produced two small but functional role-playing quests made with the Aurora Toolset, an application that comes with the role-playing game

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Neverwinter Nights and allows designers to make three-dimensional worlds. This toolset is a “modding” engine with which users create their own “modules” to share with other players. At the same time, it is a high-powered, sophisticated tool that can be used in the game design industry, since Jeannie Novak in *Game Development Essentials* also recommends it for prototyping commercial games [Novak 2005]. While the toolset is complex, it can be used to make three-dimensional environments without either rendering these graphics in Maya or 3D Studio Max or programming them in OpenGL or DirectX. Through mastering the menus and buttons of such a toolset as well as a system of dragging and dropping objects, both instructors and students can construct an explorable environment in a relatively short amount of time. A third group produced a web-based Alternate Reality Game made with Dreamweaver, Photoshop, and digital cameras. Another produced one part of a puzzle game in Macromedia Flash. This was the least successful project because Flash is the most difficult of the programs to master, which meant that large amounts of student work translated into a rough final product. If I had the opportunity to do this assignment again, I might exclusively use the Aurora Toolset because it yields visibly exciting end results that encourage students and because its “Plot Wizard” and journal system is built entirely around the idea of quests.

One group’s prototype, called *Oedipa’s Quest*, centered around the “dreaming children” episode in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Oedipa encounters a group of children warming themselves at an “imaginary fire,” who tell her that they are “dreaming the gathering” [Pynchon 1964, 118]. After they do not answer her questions satisfactorily, Oedipa “to retaliate” stops “believing in them” [Pynchon 1964, 119]. To allow players to act out this scene, the students used the Aurora toolset to build a small city with a town square. In this square, they constructed a circle of runes to represent the “hieroglyphic” posthorns that the children have scrawled on the ground, along with an “imaginary fire” made of magical sparks. Around this fire they placed children and then scripted conversations for them, creating dialogue trees with multiple forking paths of possible interaction with the children. The students also gave the children “invisibility spells” so that they would disappear when attacked, thereby representing Oedipa’s refusal to believe in them. After this encounter, players could enter a tower that the students also built in order to represent the environment of Remedios Varo’s “Embroidering Earth’s Mantle” painting. The students furnished this space with mysterious and arcane accoutrements, and then they placed an old man in the tower to represent Genghis Cohen, the stamp collector who Oedipa encounters just before she sits down to await “the crying of lot 49” and the book’s indeterminate ending in the auction room. Again using dialogue trees, the group scripted a conversation in which Cohen asks Oedipa to interpret her encounter with the children and gives her three possible answers: “solipsism,” “surrealism,” and “there is no answer. The point is to keep searching for the truth.” The first two answers result in a rebuke from Cohen because of the player’s excessive certainty in the face of ambiguity, while the third response earns the player praise and encouragement to continue gaining knowledge by exploring further. Students were pleased with this final product, but they sometimes showed frustration when the toolset could not accommodate aspects of their design document, such as allowing players to fill in blanks rather than select multiple choice answers in conversation. In future classes, an introduction to the capabilities of the toolset before writing the document would help to circumvent these disappointments.

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A second group used the Aurora toolset to create the most extensive and functional prototype of the class, the humorously titled *Polar Inverarity’s Overtly Symbolic Quest*. This prototype was highly creative and could actually be played as a game, in part because the students made excellent use of the Aurora toolset’s “plot wizard” to create quest objectives without having to master a scripting language. This group built their project around a series of “fetch quests”, in which players retrieve an item and bring it to another non-player character for a reward or to advance further in the game. Players of this group’s game had to acquire a key from Pierce Inverarity to open an armoire containing a page from *The Courier’s Tragedy* (a book discovered by Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*), which offers a clue to talk to a dreaming child from chapter five. The child sends the player to talk to the drunken sailor, who asks the player (as he asks Oedipa) to deliver a letter through the underground postal service or “W.A.S.T.E. system.” After the player does this, the sailor gives the player a golden posthorn, which must be returned to Pierce Inverarity. Each of the non-player characters’ dialogue gives some explanation of the significance of the player’s tasks, which the student group elaborates on in the notes for their presentation. The students write, “Our focus was on polar opposites in the novel, with an extreme emphasis on sacred and profane images. This is reflected in our setting, characters, and humor.” The students thus organized their project around the religious subtext of Pynchon’s novel, as first analyzed by Edward Mendelson in “The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*”. The game is filled with clever allusions to the novel,

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and (as its name suggests) is strongly symbolic.

However, the relationship between meaning and action in the second group's game is not as well integrated as in *Oedipa's Quest*, in part because the students became a little too immersed in the whimsical humor of their game. Students created a world in which Pierce Inverarity has been transformed into a polar bear, and random creatures such as talking penguins periodically appear. Nevertheless, because the group also strove to be faithful to the details of Pynchon's text, they found that elements they originally intended to be humorous acquired meaning within the context of the quest. Indeed, Pynchon's idea of a "high magic to low puns" suggests that his own aesthetic draws its own power from seemingly absurd jokes that reveal serious thematic implications upon a second look [Pynchon 1964, 129]. Thus, the "polar" bear in the group's prototype lead them to think about "polar" opposites running through the organization of their game, in which each object, character, and setting has its mirrored, symmetrical counterpart. The students write: "We split the geography into two separate but equal parts. Where one side has a very nice house, the other side has a slummy inn. One side has a nice garden with children and flowers; the other side contains ruins and skeletal remains. [...] The areas are separated by the river, water, a polar molecule. A single bridge connects the two, representing how sacred and profane are eternally linked within the novel's universe." Chance puns on the word "polar" yield an organizational principle for the quest, in which the player must help an isolated, marginalized sailor to communicate through an underground postal box in the middle of town, thereby bridging the sacred and the profane both figuratively and literally.

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In addition to this successful use of emblematic spaces, students wrote not only about the spaces of the quest but also about its rules and challenges, in order to emphasize that a quest is a goal-oriented search for meaning rather than unfocused wandering through multiple interpretations. Classroom game design need not consist primarily of a set of rules that the instructor imposes upon a class in order to guide discussion, but rather students should be at least partially responsible for designing these rules if gaming is to fulfill the promise of interactivity. When students supported their ideas about gameplay with interpretative analysis of the book, they produced a context for meaning that was both creative and interpretative. For example, Jason Kimbrell designed an action game about Pynchon's use of Jungian shadow archetypes. In this game, players would have not only standard combat moves but also an "interpret" move, akin to the "combo" or "finishing" moves in martial arts games. The "interpret" move would give characters the opportunity to experience sympathy for a demonized and shadowy Other, thereby humanizing an enemy instead of defeating it. Kimbrell writes:

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As enemies in the game, the Shadow will be portrayed as monsters. Oedipa has two options while fighting these creatures. She can kill them, like a normal action game, or she can 'interpret' them. Once she initiates the command, a quick cut-scene plays revealing the monster as a human being and Oedipa learns a special move specific to that monster. The downside to this is that interpretation has a high fail rate, which makes execution difficult. [Kimbrell 2006]

Kimbrell thus retained the challenge and violence of the typical "kill quest" with gameplay that required players to enact subtle, postmodern, and self-reflective ideas about tolerance for the demonized Other. His gameplay is meta-interpretative, introducing interpretation as itself a move in the game: one that is rendered not only as an abstract cognitive maneuver but also as a difficult "combo move" in a well-designed martial arts combat game. Instructors uncomfortable with the violence of video games or seeking to encourage readings of bloody epic and romance through the more reflective lens of postcolonial or feminist theory could use this student's idea as a template for alternative approaches to *Beowulf*, the Arthurian legends, or any text that prominently features a protagonist challenged with slaying a monstrous Other.

## Conclusion

Further inquiry into the theory and practice of quest design will allow literary scholars, games researchers, and game designers to find linkages between a tradition of games extending from King's Quest to *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, as well as from Homer's *Odyssey* to *The Crying of Lot 49*. As the academic study of games matures, the study of quests offers a possible bridge between games and narratives that can help us to progress beyond the divisive ludology

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versus narratology debate without losing sight of the venerable, implied questions about interpretative freedom, imagination, and the human search for meaning that made this debate so fierce in the first place. Moreover, further research into the history and theory of quests can take its place among a variety of studies of particular game genres that emerge as New Media researchers move past the first discipline-founding steps of game studies and into the specific inquiries that will bear the fruit of this discipline. The importance of studying quests specifically can only increase as MMORPG's and RPG's for the next-generation consoles boast of "quest systems" that contain thousands of "side quests", often interlaced with an epic main quest whose dramatic sweep still corresponds to the ancient model of the hero's journey. Because quests are also a structural paradigm that connects hundreds of literary works from myriad periods and genres, pedagogical applications of quests can potentially benefit humanities teachers in a broad range of educational situations. These applications could range from honors seminars introducing students to ancient epic, to thematic classes about the relationship between New Media and literature, to single-author "major figures" courses on authors as diverse as Edmund Spenser and Thomas Pynchon. Moreover, the most productive questions about quests may come from a design perspective, addressing the issue of how to relate theoretical understandings of quests with their enactment in gameplay. Since quests operate as a formal structure in narrative and an activity in games, the adaptation of narratives into games requires not just a theoretical consideration of interactivity but of the practical action that scholars, educators, and designers can themselves take in order to produce this interactivity. New Media theorists need to consider what technological skill-sets might be required in order to produce meaningful action in games, and how strategies derived from the literary tradition of quest games could be used to create this action. My own book in progress, *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*, discusses ways that a literary technique of symbolic correspondences derived from medieval romance and Renaissance allegory can help designers to construct games in which meaning emerges from gameplay. Four components of a theory of quests (a quest system of journal updates and conversations with non-player characters, spaces, objects, challenges) can themselves "correspond" to another set of design skills (journal management and dialogue construction, level design, creation of quest items, and programming within game engines or "scripting"). If we treat the quest in its etymological sense as a kind of "inquest" or "inquiry" in which players and designers produce meaning rather than passively consuming it, then the next step in this inquiry may be to ask how we can actively create meaning through our design decisions.

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